EMI University Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Design and Management of Academic English Listening Classes

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions of their teachers' instructional strategies by students of an EMI university EAP course. It describes teacher-student interactions within language classrooms and investigates how their value is understood by students. Six participants were studied, using classroom observations employing the Foreign Language Interaction (FLINT) system, and semi-structured interviews. The participants consisted of four students and two teachers, who were enrolled in the same university EAP course. The analysis revealed persistent difficulties in academic listening amongst English learners regardless of their proficiency level. The findings indicate that EAP instructors employ a coherent set of teaching activities with an implicit rationale to develop listening strategies, but that this rationale is not always understood or aligned with students' own learning strategies. The findings are limited, but, even so, suggest that instructors and students should discuss the rationale for their learning strategies more explicitly at the outset of a course.

Keywords: EAP, Academic listening, FLINT, Classroom management

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Introduction

English medium instruction (EMI) has gained momentum in mainland China in line with a global endeavour to internationalise higher education (Zhou & Thompson, 2023). Its expansion is the result of an increase in the number of overseas exchange students and the rise in China of highly fluent English-speaking students. However, the pedagogical literature has until recently focused on addressing teachers' English proficiency and it has neglected to consider students' ability to learn through English (Jiang et al., 2019). In English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts, Chinese students face numerous linguistic challenges; a relatively neglected area is their need to acquire better listening skills to comprehend English fluently (Alonso, 2012; Zhou, 2023).

The present study draws upon interviews and classroom observations, to explore how instructors seek to enhance academic listening skills and how students perceive these efforts. The study offers insights into how listening skills and strategies are taught and perceived in class and presents some suggestions about how teachers can effectively address Chinese EAP students' English listening learning needs.

Literature Review

Four areas of research are relevant to the present study: general studies of listening fluency applied to academic contexts (Rost, 2018), academic listening *per se* (Rost & Wilson, 2013), active listening and classroom management. Each is considered in turn.

Listening Fluency in Academic Contexts

The term "fluency" is often associated with facility in speaking, reading, and writing, although it is less commonly connected with listening. Listening fluency is related to with the speakers' speed, smoothness, and cohesion, none of which is controlled by the actual listener (Rost, 2018). In the Asian EAP context, students face three major challenges: long stretches of spoken discourse, a wide range of speech situations, and the requirement to give clear responses to what is heard (Rost, 2018). Addressing these EAP listening challenges, Rozak et al. (2021) advocate using lectures covering relevant topics as listening materials, repeated listening in graded speech rate levels from slow to normal, and scaffolding linked-skills and activities, like background knowledge activation, and collaborative speaking and reading, to name but a few. These activities can help improve students' listening fluency.

Academic English Listening

Distinguished from everyday modes of listening, such as face-to-face conversations, watching TV, and listening to the radio, academic English listening is defined as processing spoken language in academic contexts (Flowerdew & Miller, 2014). Developers of academic listening textbooks often assume learners' capability to discover and distinguish various linguistic features (Flowerdew & Miller, 2014). However, EAP students cannot be expected to digest listening events in the same way as native speakers do (Junko et al., 2014). Researchers have therefore defined five main teaching strategies: affective, top-down, bottom-up, interactive, and autonomous (Rost, 2018; Rost & Wilson, 2013). These strategies assume that general factual information, local factual information, and socio-cultural knowledge should be contained in the academic listening teaching process (Yazdanpanah et al., 2014). The strategies also provide theoretical guidance for understanding the EAP classroom language addressed in this research.

Active Listening

"Active listening" is a strategy designed to improve interactive fluency by helping learners develop an active mindset towards listening input. It is, basically, the ability to understand, paraphrase and summarise a speaker's message (Ali et al., 2021; Rost, 2018). One effective means of developing the skills associated with active listening is the use of "speaking circles", where learners work in small groups to narrate unfamiliar stories with clear plot lines to their peers. "Cloud discussions" are sometimes used if there are sufficient technical resources, whereby the teacher poses prompts (questions, images, or short readings) to elicit student responses, which are recorded (Rost & Wilson, 2013) for peer listening. In both activities, the nature of teacher-student interaction is crucial in fostering an active listening strategy.

Classroom Management (CM)

Classroom Management (CM) refers to the teachers' active contributions to the observed classroom events, such as providing feedback, asking and responding to students' questions, allowing a "wait time" after proposing a topic, and so on. CM can also be defined as the ways by which instructors promote and and enhance learning, for example, by modifying their speech to enhance their intelligibility (cf..Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Nunan (1991) recommends that language teachers should try to elaborate rather than simplify language when assisting students with com-

prehension. In other words, they should use paraphrase, repetition, and rhetorical markers instead of simplifying their grammar and vocabulary. The ultimate goal of CM is to improve students' language proficiency in either way, so the teacher should adopt various methods to achieve the lesson objectives. This study attends to a number of CM events that seem to aid students' listening learning processes.

Methodology

▪ *Context and Participants*

This paper reports a small-scale research project that was carried out at an EMI university in Guangdong, China with four first-year students (Participants A-D) and two teachers. The students' English proficiency levels ranged from B2 to C1, and they had started learning academic English listening in the first year at university. Comparatively speaking, participants A and D had a lower proficiency level than participants B and C. All four students were taking the same course "English for Academic Purposes" but under the instruction of two different teachers, both from anglophone countries. The course lasted four months, with the aim of helping students improve their academic listening, reading, writing, and speaking English skills. The students spent six

hours specifically studying academic listening in class. In this study, only those sessions explicitly designated to EAP listening were investigated.

All participants either directly or indirectly involved in the data collection (i.e., school departments, teachers, students) received information about the study. School departments, teachers and students gave informed consent for participation and the raw data was destroyed after the study was completed.

▪ *Materials and Methods*

For this study, informative qualitative data was collected using classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. The Foreign Language Interaction (FLINT) system aided the researcher in analysing classroom language through a consideration of "teacher talk" and "student talk" (Moskowitz, 1971). Four classroom observations were conducted to observe how the teachers interacted with the class, and the techniques they used to help students comprehend listening activities related to academic topics. The aim was to understand what kinds of strategies were helpful and how the teachers interacted with the students in the classroom. Four semi-structured student interviews were conducted to collect information about their conscious awareness of academic listening skills,

and the strategies they had learned through classes, and to obtain their feedback on the teachers' pedagogy. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed using content analysis, to delve into the students' academic English listening difficulties, to gauge the responses towards the listening strategies taught by their instructors, and their own independent listening strategies, which predated their attendance on the course.

Results

The results report two separate stages in the study. In the first part, the researcher was present in the classroom with the FLINT classroom observation sheets and marked down certain events that corresponded with the FLINT system. However, not all of the twelve FLINT categories are covered in this study, for some of them are unrelated to the teaching and learning of academic listening. As a result, this study has excluded them. In the second stage, the researcher asked interviewees questions based on four main categories, namely, their "academic listening difficulties", "viewpoint on the effectiveness of instructed strategies", "students' existing strategies preceding their teachers' instruction" and "pedagogical suggestions for teachers".

▪ *Classroom Observations: Teacher Talk*

Classroom observations were guided by the long-established FLINT system which categorised the instructional strategies employed in the classroom. The FLINT system conceptualises classroom language into three categories: teacher talk, student talk and miscellaneous (Moskowitz, 1971). Using these categories as a point of departure, various strategies were observed.

A. Vocabulary enhancement

The instructor regularly prompted the students to consider ways of paraphrasing or restating concepts. This strategy activated a wider repertoire of vocabulary that would be useful when listening. For example in the following exchange, the instructor checks students' awareness of different key expressions.

Teacher	"We have phrases like 'lecturer', 'look at', 'international'. For example, what is the synonyms of 'lecturer' could be?"
Students	"Speaker."

Teacher	"Speaker, teacher, presenter. One minute, I need you to work in a group face-to-face, and come up with some synonyms of these vocabulary items!"
Students	"What does 'look at' mean?"
Teacher	"For example, today we are going to look at..."
Students	"Focus on."
Teacher	"Jayson said 'focus on.' Anyone else? You need to focus on this information when you listen to the lecture later."

The stress on developing a broad repertoire of relevant vocabulary is restated in the following exchange:

Teacher	"In this class, you are going to identify the main ideas in a lecture from its introduction, and you should be able to use synonyms to paraphrase. This is very important, because some students are struggling with it in their essays."

B.   Setting objectives

Another strategy regularly used by instructors is to prompt students to think of the purpose of the passage they are going to listen to and to set appropriate objectives. So, in the following exchange, the scenario of a lecture introduction is presented, and the students are encouraged to develop active strategies for decoding the content.

Teacher	"So, one, what are we listening for?"
Students	(Silence)
Teacher	"What are we listening for?"
Students	"A lecture."
Teacher	"Yes, we know what we are listening to, but what are we listening for?"
Students	(Silence)
Teacher	"We are going to listen to an introduction of a lecture, and we are going to write down key noun phrases, important nouns, so we know what our lecture is about."

C. Face-saving correction strategies

It follows that when the instructor regularly prompts student responses, there are some that will be incorrect or insufficient. The instructors tended to correct such responses in a positive manner, reworking the student responses or seeking supplementary information. In such ways, students were encouraged to respond to questions in the confidence that they would not lose face if they are incorrect. In the first example, the instructor restates question after simply acknowledging an incorrect response.

Teacher	"What are we listening for?"
Students	"A lecture."
Teacher	"Yes, we know what we are listening to, but what are we listening for?"

In the next example, the instructor seeks expansion of an insufficient response.

Teacher	"What's the key word there?"
Students	"Marketing."
Teacher	"Marketing what?"
Students	"Marketing communication."
Teacher	"Marketing communication, now you've got the right idea. There are three, four important noun phrases.

In the final exchange, a student suggests a synonym for "look at" (meaning "consider") that is incorrect in context, and the instructor acknowledges that the incorrect response would be appropriate in other contexts.

Students	"Stare at."
Teacher	"Well 'stare at' is a synonym for 'look at'. But if the lecturer says 'today we are going to stare at different context', isn't it weird? So, there is one thing that we are learning about synonyms, that we can't put in any word that means the same, we have to think about the sentence and the context that it is going into."

By minimising their criticism of incorrect responses, the instructors also "reduce interruption and 'maintain the flow'" (Walsh, 2011, p.33).

▪ *Classroom Observations: Student Talk*

The FLINT system also helps describe student talk. Since this pre-listening phase of the task is characterised by teacher prompts and questions, the learners' contributions are generally confined to specific responses to given topics. A typical example is given below:

Teacher	"Theodore! One idea that your group has talked about! Just one interesting thing you just talked about."
Students	"They are changing their prices."
Teacher	"Maybe McDonald's pricing is changing when entering into different countries, very good. Arnold! What are other things you discussed about international brands?"
Students	"They are translating their names to other countries' languages."

Overall the non-threatening, fairly traditional question-and-answer exchanges help the students develop a frame or mental schema that will support their comprehension of the listening passage, in this case a lecture on international marketing. The teacher establishes the topic and activates the associated vocabulary, supplementing the students' repertoire where necessary.

Classroom Observations: Miscellaneous The FLINT coding allows for miscellaneous categories that are peculiar to particular settings. In any EMI setting there will be some translanguaging or code-switching between English and the first language (L1). The function of using L1 is to help students understand the teaching objective quickly, often used when teachers think "the students did not or could not understand their English explanations" (Tang 2002, p. 38).

Teacher	"What's the class that has lectures for you? Tell me the name of the course."
Students	"University Chinese."
Teacher	"University Chinese! What is the Chinese name?"
Students	" 大学国文 (university Chinese)."
Teacher	" 大学 (university)... Yeah there you go, everyone understand, yeah? It's a lecture. [...] We are going to identify the main ideas in a lecture."

The classroom observation data reveal listening tasks being introduced by relatively straightforward teacher prompts and student responses, with some mixing of languages, and a generally encouraging non-threatening ambience. One aspect that might have been expected more was praise and encouragement for student responses (cf. Winanta et al., 2020); however, a generally interactive and productive atmosphere was evident in the sessions observed.

▪ *Semi-structured Interviews*

The nature of teacher-student interactions in the classroom are well-researched, and those observed in the present study aligned with earlier discussions. However, what is less researched is student responses to such instruction. To investigate this question, semi-structured interviews with four students were developed to address three core questions: (1) What difficulties do you have when you learn academic listening? (2) What listening strategies have you developed? (3) What new listening strategies has your instructor taught you? All participants were prompted to answer these questions, and "there was also allowance for interviewees to raise additional issues and comments" (Pekkanen et al., 2013 , p.96).

A. Academic Listening Difficulties Perceived by Students

The content analysis of the semi-structured interviews reveals, as one would expect, a pattern of subjects who reported feeling that it was hard to concentrate when listening to long lectures in English and that the activity was energy-consuming. Some also expressed a need for translation from English to Chinese. For example, Participant A commented:

> *I need to do a translation from English to Chinese ahead of comprehension. This kind of translation proficiency will be limited by my condition, let's say, fatigue or malaise. Therefore, English listening for me is a thing that can only be carried out when I am energetic and concentrated.*

Her answer corresponded to a well-attested characteristic of EAP learners, which is that they find it hard to digest sustained listening events (e.g. Junko et al., 2014).

Another common issue shared by the four interviewees was related to teachers' accents. Participant A also remarked:

> *Some teachers have accents, then you may have some problems understanding certain words, and even the course content.*

Participants B and C also raised the issue of intelligibility of unfamiliar accents, with made concentration consistently more difficult for them.

When asked to compare the difficulties they experienced during high school and university, two respondents noted limited vocabulary and utilization of English as abiding issues:

> *My vocabulary is limited to what I learned in textbooks, so when I use English in daily communication, not off the top of my head can I think of appropriate expressions.* (Participant A).

Participant D also noted that

> *technical terms trap me a lot, [...], vocabulary building is the similar thing (in high school and university).*

She further expressed that she had trouble associating words that she heard with their written forms.

From the interview data, then, students perceived themselves as being relatively weak in academic listening, citing the difficulty of concentrating, coping with unfamiliar accents, being unfamiliar with technical vocabulary, and being unable to utilise the English they had learned. These factors were perceived as limiting their listening fluency.

B. Students' Views on the Effectiveness of Instructors' Strategies

When asked about the task which improved their academic listening the most, the responses varied. Participant A recalled one specific task when her teacher "wrote down the key words that would be mentioned before class began", and noted that "you may not pay attention to English explanations of words, but in his class, for example, you will be asked to explain 'main point' in English." Since Participant A was experiencing difficulty in switching easily between languages, explaining vocabulary in English could be seen as helping her internalise English better. While Participants B and D mentioned "circling key words" as a helpful strategy, Participant C mentioned that:

> *I don't want to put my attention on the one specific question. I mean the dialogue would always reach this part, but if you just focus on this one point, then maybe you will miss some of the points. So, I just wait, there's the gap between questions, right?*

In other words, Participant C favoured grasping the overall gist of a listening passage before focusing on those key words or phrases targeted in pre-listening prompts or questions. In this her own strategy ran counter to the class activities; the

pre-listening tasks were seen as a distraction to her own comprehension strategy. Participants also differed in their views of the value of practising speaking in class, in order to enhance listening skills, some seeing the skills as integrated and others as distinct:

> *I think learning a language is about you use it more, yeah, and by using it.* (Participant D)

> *I don't think there is a bound link between them. Like, can practising speaking help with my listening? I may doubt that.* (Participant A)

Though the number of students interviewed was small, there was still diversity in their views about the effectiveness of the instructors' preferred teaching strategies. This suggests, at least, that there is scope for discussion of these strategies – or justification of them – at the outset of the course of teaching.

C. Students' Existing Listening Strategies

When asked about their own listening strategies, all of the participants stated that "paying attention to the major theme" was the main strategy they had previously adopted when taking an exam or attending a lecture. However, they also felt that merely relying on this strategy was not sufficient

to deal with the challenges posed by academic listening at university level. Participant A stated that:

> *I think it's more to do with improving your proficiency gradually by exposing to authentic English context. Either pre- or post-listening tasks are there to help you comprehend how native speakers manipulate English language, and how do they narrate on a piece of matter.*

She recognised that the instruction given in her EAP courses were designed to deepen and broaden her appreciation of lecturers' (here simplistically referred to as "native speakers") narrative and rhetorical styles.

Participant B mentioned "task-based listening" as her favourite strategy, a legacy she developed in her high school years:

> *I focus on the recording and kept the main idea in the first few sentences. And I try to match the question in my mind to the content of the record. And, yeah, maybe do the selection. And at the same time complete the question I have to do. So, yeah, that's basically a very concentrate process.*

In general, "paying attention to the major theme" or attending to "the main idea" is the most cited strategy that interviewees mention as linking their previous learning to their current courses. EAP teachers

should be aware that learners have developed their own strategies at school and might again discuss openly with them how these skills will be developed further at university level.

Discussion

This study sought to explore how EAP listening is taught in language support classes in an EMI institution, and how students respond to such teaching. The class observations suggest that the instructors' classroom management (CM) is in accordance with standard methods of EAP teaching and learning, e.g. pre-teaching questions frame the content of lectures and anticipate key language; students are required to do activities to check their comprehension of key details; and there is a focus on vocabulary building through paraphrasing using appropriate synonyms. What is innovative about this study is the investigation of student responses to this instruction. The interviewees acknowledged that they faced challenges in academic listening, which fell into categories such as "concentration," "accents," "vocabulary," and "utilisation of English." These findings are in line with that of Zhou and Thompson (2023) that, when listening to English, Chinese students struggle to recognise words that they have seen in written form, and that of Rost (2018) that novice EAP students are unable to deal with long speeches as well as highly proficient speakers do. The findings from interview suggested activities like speaking circles, where learners work in small groups (Rost & Wilson, 2013), are perceived to be effective.

Conclusion

As the number of Chinese students who seek education using English as a Medium of Instruction, both overseas and in China itself, is on the rise, it is important to understand their strategies for enhancing their academic English listening, particularly for lectures. By interviewing EMI university students and observing classroom dynamics, the study explored students' academic listening difficulties and the strategies designed to overcome them. The generalisability of the results reported here is obviously constrained by the sample size; nevertheless, the observations and interviews raise some salient points for further exploration. EAP listening instruction follows a methodology that is by now ritualised why its rationale may be evident to instructors, its application might be in conflict with strategies that the learners developed before attending university – and of course, with the development of new

technology, digital applications are now coming increasingly prevalent that support students' comprehension of English in real time. Learners consequently have ideas about teaching and learning that may differ from or be in conflict with those of their instructors. Further research is needed to broaden this pilot study, to understand better how students perceive and respond to the teaching of academic listening.

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